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First Presbyterian Church
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The Quiet Reign 1 Kings 19:4-13

Our text this morning is one of the ancient stories from our faith of the prophet Elijah who is the last prophet of Israel and is now fleeing for his life from the city and from an enraged queen Jezebel. Hear the word of God:

(Elijah) himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." (God) said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" This is the Word of the Lord: Thanks be to God.

About six months into my tenure here, a member came into my office with the newspaper in their hand and tossed it down on my desk, pointing out an article about a new mission initiative that a neighboring church was undertaking that had made the front page of the faith and values section. "Our church should be making headlines every day" they said. After shaking the fear that this was some sort of preamble to a personnel review as the mission minister, a little unpacking of the statement revealed that the sentiment came from this person's feeling that this church does so much that is newsworthy every day, which was, actually, a lovely place for the thought to come from. But what lingered for me after our conversation was this dawning realization about the complexity of being a person of faith and a community of faith in a culture that is so much about the headlines.

It is a seduction that is intrinsic to our human condition to have a church that makes headlines, children that make headlines, a marriage that makes headlines, a work life that makes headlines. It feeds our need to know that what we do has value in a way that is affirming for us and evident to everyone else. And we want a faith that makes headlines too. We want our God to be as we want ourselves and the systems that surround us to be, which is the same thing that we want our experiences and our faith and discipleship to be. As Henri Nouwen says, we want them all to be powerful and spectacular and relevant. We want a God who makes a big splash, who acts undeniably, who speaks to us in bold-faced, capital letters. We hunger for a personal faith that is characterized by newsworthy strides forward, unwavering trust in the face of uncertainty. Deep conviction in God's providence when everything is falling apart. Revelations that put us on the right track once and for all. We want to be disciples who can claim perfect attendance at church, who read all of our Lenten devotions, who study the scriptures regularly, give as much as we should, show up as much as we should, love as much as we should, podcast all the sermons when we miss them, and pray for twenty minutes twice a day. But the truth is that most of us feel like our faith and our discipleship and even our experience of God is something that is perhaps best situated in the police blotter in the back of the paper rather than something that would find its way to any front page.

“Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.” Strong winds, earthquakes and fires- this is all front-page material. But God was not in the wind, earthquake, or fire, and Elijah knew it. Elijah knew to look for God in the place that was most easy to overlook. He knew to look for God in the space that anyone could have missed. He knew to look for God in the silence. In the very place where it would have seemed to an onlooker that nothing was happening at all, that is where God was most present and active, alive and at work, inviting Elijah to join him there.

The gospel of Matthew tells us that the death of Jesus was heralded by crowds, paparazzi, commotion, spectacle and, upon the moment of crucifixion, cosmic upheaval. The temple curtain was torn in two, an earthquake shook the ground, tombs in the graveyards fell open and shattered, in Luke it says the sky turned to dark. But it was in the quiet of the dawn, in a garden thick with dew and the chill of a fog that was only beginning to glow with the coming dawn, that the living, resurrected God in Jesus Christ was heralded by silence. In the space that was most easy to overlook. In the place that was so ordinary that anyone could have missed it. After the news about Jesus had already circulated out of the police blotter and into the archives- that was the very place that was filled with indescribable, incomprehensible significance as Jesus shuffled off his linen wrappings, and strode out of the grave to usher in the quiet reign of God's kingdom in the world.

Your testimony and witness and love as a congregation has shaped my life and formed my capacity for ministry in more ways than I could ever name or sufficiently thank you, my colleagues, or God for. There is simply too much fullness to the experience for words so I can only suffice to say that you will always be in my heart and I am so grateful to be in yours, and I

give thanks that, by grace, we find ourselves in God's heart, which forever unites us all. But one of the great imprints that you have made on my life and on my husband and mother's life is the way that you loved us through the death of my father just over three years ago. A heart attack had left him with severe brain damage that, after a month of painful in-between space, ultimately led to his death. What we had known of the man who was so filled with good humor, dry wit, beautiful music, boundless warmth and a serene, jolly spirit all his life, was now experienced through a largely flat, mute affect with a few glorious exceptions that we clung to. His eyes were wide, his gaze fixed in front of him without alteration, his mouth slightly open and locked in a strange sort of smile most of the time. All I saw in it was disassociation and detachment. His silence was experienced as separation, inability to connect.

Several months after his death while on retreat at St. Benedict's Monastery in Colorado, I asked one of the monks, Thomas Keating, if he thought that true unity with God was possible in this lifetime. Of all the ways that he could have answered the question, he began to wonder aloud if perhaps experiences of brain damage or even death might be times when we are so stripped of our ego, our every faculty and drive for self-promotion, our striving for the satisfaction of our needs, that this could be a time of profound union with God.

In an instant the door was opened for everything about the trauma of the months prior to be reframed. Now before me was the prospect that what I had experienced as a void in my father's life was actually a space of possibility. The strange expression on his face that was so foreign to this man, the look of a child caught up in the contentment of resting easy in his father's arms. His gaze fixed with wide-eyed wonderment on some greater fullness to his reality either outside of himself or within that I could not see but that was no less real. What was perceived to be the absence of one thing physically, socially, neurologically by any onlooker was perhaps the presence of something spiritually that was far greater than anyone could imagine. What I saw as negative space, a place of profound potential and fullness for him.

I don't have to know the physiology of it all, I'm not concerned with data to verify or give evidence to the contrary for any of this. What I know is that God has a track record of faithfulness and a pattern of activity throughout time that suggests that he will use any and every means possible to connect with us. The winds of uncertainty blew, plans for the future quaked and cracked. Grief blazed a scar on our hearts. But God was at work in the silence, inviting us to join him there.

It is in the space of silence, and counterintuitive corners, and unremarkable daily tasks that is forum where the Holy Spirit does some of God's very best work. In those spaces in between the spectacles, away from the headlines. In those ambiguous waters of ordinary time floating between islands of events like Christmas and Easter, diagnosis and recovery, argument and reconciliation, saying goodbye to one minister and welcoming another, between former employment and new employment, confidence and renewed confidence, birth and death, crucifixion and empty tomb- this is where God's kingdom quietly reigns. Elijah wrapped his face in his mantle when he heard the silence and went out to meet the Lord. The lack of a physical perception that something of significance is happening does not mean that a great spiritual reality is not taking place in you, and around you, through you and in others. Spaces of neutrality and ambiguity in life are places of profound potential for the Spirit, at work just

beneath the surface in ways that are beyond all that we will ever see. Moments that anyone could miss because you don't think they are special- are the places where God's kingdom reigns. From the vantage point of my tenure with you, I can say that the most powerful ways I have witnessed God at work in and through this church are not the many things about this church that would make headlines. You would have to ask my colleagues for themselves, but I would venture to guess that they would agree. We have all witnessed God work perhaps most powerfully in the quiet corners of life. In the simple ways that you have cared for each other and had the courage to receive care. In the ways you have encouraged each other, challenged each other, served together, grieved together, shared life together, stretched to better come alongside God's people together, prayed and worshipped together. God has been powerfully at work in the ways that you have at times wounded each other, and forgiven each other and tried again to love each other better still. In your struggle to be faithful with your resources and sometimes in spite of them. In your frustration with poverty and the inertia in our world that keeps people in it. God's kingdom has reigned in your visits around the globe and your visits to homebound members, in the ways you have studied and wrestled with your faith, and engaged God even if only for a fight rather than walk away. God has been powerfully at work in you as you have lived for Christ in the sanctuary and behind computer screens, around meeting tables and dinner tables and communion tables and recovery circles and font. In the food pantry and choir loft, in counseling chairs and hospital rooms, in playrooms and classrooms, in the hallways of your school and in the community. It has reigned in your quiet commitment to show up, to come together and stay together, to turn toward one another in love and to walk together in love out into the world.

This is all part of the daily reality of what it means to be the church. These are not things that transpire in the course of life while we wait for really big things to happen, they are not places we inhabit while we wait for God to call us to something greater. The forum of daily life is God's big event. Those ordinary places that anyone could miss, the spaces in between spectacles that don't make the news, these are the primary forums in which God is shaping you as a disciple of Jesus Christ and calling you to bear witness to the gospel together as a community of faith by the way that you love. One medieval writer says that, "If you cannot understand my silence, you will never understand my speech." Perhaps this is what God is trying to tell us too. That when winds blow and the earth quakes, when fires rage out of control, God is at work in the silence, the space between spectacles and behind the headlines where the full story has always been, and is inviting us to join him there.

In an upper room, after the spectacle of the resurrection had subsided, when the disciples were locked behind closed doors for fear of persecution, Christ stood before them saying, "Peace be with you," and showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. What they perceived to be an end was just another beginning. What they saw as an interim time in ministry was actually prime time for God. Christ shows up and reveals that there are no seasons of transition in the kingdom-down time while disciples wait for real ministry to happen, or real life-shaping opportunities to arise. Ministry is happening now, because life is happening now, and the resurrected Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit is happening right now. And he is at work to win his kingdom not with sweeping strides, but with deliberation, loving patience, persistent accompaniment and profound intention through each one of you.

So get up, eat, drink and take care of yourselves. God has set cakes on hot stones for you in one another to nourish yourselves by so that the journey will not be too much for you. Go in the strength of the Lord and participate in the quiet reign of God's kingdom every day. The Christian walk isn't about headlining in discipleship, so don't worry. Just be faithful to the gospel and trust the rest to God.

Amen.